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ABSTRACT

The sharp decline in the number of male undergraduates registering for public relations (PR) courses has created concern that public relations is becoming a "woman's field" and will experience a concomitant drop in salaries and prestige. Studies indicate that male undergraduates perceive PR as being not well respected, as offering little or no chance for advancement in the business world, and as paying low salaries. Current public relations educators should put a new emphasis on training students (women in particular) to take leadership roles in complex organizations; should strive for a balance of the sexes so that "gender" is not viewed by anyone in management as an important determinant of the character of the field; and should actively recruit male undergraduates for the study of public relations, with an eye toward maintaining parity of the sexes. When Rutgers University (New Jersey) discovered that its undergraduate PR courses were composed of 25% males, it adopted an affirmative action approach, labeling males a minority in the PR program, and taking the following steps to attract them: (1) requiring a written application from every student to enter courses, (2) recruiting from the introductory classes, (3) using only "managerial type" teachers, (4) using teaching assistants who are good role models for males, (5) using internships and a "mentor" program to match males with role models in the field, and (6) selecting "clients" for class projects that will interest males. Following the concerted effort to make the profession appeal to males, the male/female ratio in PR at Rutgers returned to almost even. (NKA)

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Public Relations Division

MAKING PR MACHO: REVERSING THE SEX GAP IN UNDERGRADUATE PUBLIC RELATIONS PROGRAMS

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Making PR Macho: Reversing the Sex Gap in Undergraduate Public Relations Programs

The increase in the number of women practicing public relations has long been a topic of discussion with public relations practitioners. Women now constitute 48% of PRSA membership and the latest statistics from the Department of Labor show that 51% of the public relations workforce is female. The sharp decline in the number of male undergraduates registering for public relations courses and declaring majors in public relations reflects this trend, creating concern that public relations is becoming a "woman's field" and will experience a drop in salaries and prestige. Comparisons are drawn between public relations and the "feminized" professions of nursing and social work, which, though they both perform a meaningful function in society, have never achieved the power of professions with male majorities (Bates, 1983, p. 6). If public relations educators do not take steps to attract male students to the field, public relations practitioners may find themselves in a similar predicament.

The reasons for the growing number of women in public relations are both economic and psychological in

nature. Since public relations skills are not viewed as being readily transferrable to the responsibilities of upper-level management, public relations people seldom advance very far in the company; therefore, public relations people are not considered threatening within the corporate power structure. Also, women are generally paid less than men. Early on, companies began loading their public relations departments with women to meet affirmative action quotas. The affirmative action reporting forms were so unspecific and the job categories so general that the government seldom caught on unless the company was undergoing a thorough review (Business Week, 1978, p. 122).

In two of his columns in Public Relations Journal, Don Bates offers another reason for the influx of women: they seem to have better academic backgrounds and writing skill (Bates, 1983, p. 6). In clarifying his statement about the superior writing skill of women, he wrote that women may be better writers because they consider writing to be one of their "strong suits" and work harder at it. Also, women entering the field are usually given writing tasks (Bates, 1984, p. 4).

Finally, the negative perceptions of public relations create a snowball effect. Young men seeking

careers do not consider public relations, leaving a disproportionate number of female applicants for the available openings and lending more support for the image of public relations as a woman's field. Perceptions of public relations were studied at Virginia Commonwealth University using student focus groups. Of the five major perceptions of public relations held by men, three were related to the concept of public relations as a woman's field: (a) men have no desire to work with or for women, (b) the salaries offered are too low, and (c) with EOE, it is almost impossible to get an entry-level job. The other male perceptions of public relations were that public relations is not respected and offers little or no chance for advancement in the business world (Joseph, 1986, p. 18). These perceptions are shared by male undergraduates at colleges and universities across the country, where, in some chapters, PRSSA membership shows a 10 to 1 female majority.

Regarding the lack of respect and scarce opportunity for advancement, male undergraduates may be interested in recent studies which indicate that the planning functions of public relations are becoming more prevalent. Brody (1985) writes that time spent in the

role of the planner/manager is increasing disproportionately to the time spent in the communication technician role. Broom and Dozier (1986) write, "...income and participation in management decision-making increase when practitioners change from the technician role to the managerial role, and...this change occurs most frequently for men." (p. 55).

Bates' rationalization is that women haven't been in the field long enough and so they have less time in grade--they lack the experience to command salary parity with men. Also, the value of women is perceived or accepted as being less than the value of men. It may not be right, but it's so (Bates, 1984, p.4). In a recent survey of 1983 graduates, females with BA's reported a starting salary that was, on average, $1,438 less than that of their male counterparts with the same degree. The lowest salary reported by a male was $3,360 higher than the lowest salary reported by a female. Of the four respondents with master's degrees, two of the three females reported higher salaries than the male (Teahan, 1984, p.26).

Underlying all of this is the prevalent view that women lack the physical and emotional stamina to succeed in most business undertakings (Bates, 1983, p.6).

Karen Cullen, of Cullen & Casey, says, "The nation's major corporations still prefer to have an agency that is fronted by a man," and reports that she has turned down business to avoid the image of a "woman's boutique." (Bernstein, 1986, p. 66).

Countering the charge that public relations is becoming a woman's profession is Needham Porter Novelli's Charlotte Klein, who says that the growing number of women in public relations is only starting to reflect the number of women in the population. Her position is supported by the Bureau of Labor statistics, which reports that in 1986, women held 29,000 more professional jobs than men as compared to 1980, when women held 677,000 fewer professional jobs than men (Winkleman, 1986, p. 6). Klein also calls comparisons to nursing and social work invalid because those are low-paid, limited-opportunity jobs. Public relations is not. (Bernstein, 1986, p. 66-67).

Given the realities of the feminization of the field, today's public relations educators face three choices:

(1) Remain apart from the issue, saying, in effect, "our job is to teach the students who come to us; the

shape of the field depends on factors outside of the educator's control."

(2) Put a new emphasis on training young people in general--but young women in particular--to take leadership roles in complex organizations so they can be viewed as potential management material.

(3) Strive for a balance of the sexes so that "gender" is not viewed by anyone in management as an important determinant of the character of the field or the promotability of its practitioners.

The first option might appear appealing to an educator in another liberal arts discipline. The English teacher or the professor of chemistry needn't speculate on the effect of the imbalance of sexes in their classrooms. But public relations is a field for activists who see themselves as responsible for shaping change...and the acceptance of change. It is not likely that any but the most lethargic of public relations teachers prefers to remain passive in the face of what has been characterized as a potential threat to the profession.

The second option is a viable one, and, indeed, it is already being exercised. An analysis of syllabi of public relations management courses by Elizabeth Lance

Toth of Southern Methodist University shows that increasing emphasis is being put on giving undergraduate public relations majors an understanding of management techniques that will help them to fit themselves and their activities to the larger organization (Toth, 1984). A workshop on teaching the public relations management course was offered by the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in December, 1986, and will be repeated in July, 1987. Recent textbooks in the field have adopted a management perspective, such as Public Relations Management by Objectives (Nager and Allen, 1984), Managing Public Relations (Grunig and Hunt, 1984), and Experts in Action: Inside Public Relations (Cantor, 1984).

The balance of this paper will explore the third option, that of "recruiting" male undergraduates to the study of public relations, with an eye toward maintaining a parity of the sexes that will help render moot the issue of whether public relations is or has become predominantly a woman's profession. Measures taken at one university to regain a balance of the sexes will be described and analyzed.

It has only been four years since Rutgers University offered the full four-course sequence required by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) in order to qualify for sponsorship of an undergraduate student chapter of the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA). Prior to that, Rutgers University had been featured in PRSA's Public Relations Journal as an example of a program that purposely limited public relations offerings in order to keep the focus on liberal arts rather than professional training (Greenberg, 1984).

Once the decision was made to offer the full four-course sequence, Rutgers University began keeping records of the number and type of students enrolled in public relations courses. The main purpose for the record-keeping stemmed from a concern that groups of students working for clients on "real-world" projects in the campaigns course should reflect "real-world" diversity. Same-sex teams were prohibited by the instructors, as were all-Greek, single ethnic group, all-one-religion, or any other type of homogeneous arrangements.

From the beginning, it was easy for the instructors to demand and insure that Greek groups take a

non-fraternity member, that minority students not gravitate to one team, and that all-commuter groups diversify in some way or another. But immediately a new issue emerged: there weren't enough male students to prevent the formation of single-sex account groups. In the spring of 1984 an all-female group was permitted to form simply because there were no males left.
The instructors gave some thought to increasing the size of account groups that would work on public relations programs for campus and community clients, but it was decided that educational objectives would not be served by putting five or six students in a group.

What has now been taken for granted in many undergraduate public relations programs hit Rutgers University like a shock wave: "We have fewer than 25 percent males enrolling in our courses. We are well on our way to looking like a home economics or nursing program. Male students who take a look at public relations must get the feeling that they will be distinctly in the minority...and thus they are likely to go elsewhere. It is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy that public relations is a field for women."

Nobody felt comfortable with the situation, including the young women who looked around the

classroom and wondered what kind of field they had chosen. Something had to be done.

Fortunately, the hand-wringing phase at Rutgers University did not go on for very long (as it threatens to do in the professional field). After all, we have a very useful model for what to do when a minority is underrepresented in academia, because we have been using Affirmative Action programs for than 15 years to attract more women teachers and more non-white students.

Males were labeled a minority in the area of undergraduate public relations education at Rutgers University. A conscious effort was begun to recruit them into the public relations courses, to make the program attractive to them, and even to make certain exceptions that would permit them easier access to high-demand courses.

Following is a list of the steps that were taken to enhance male registration and retention in the public relations courses at Rutgers University:

(1) Make every student apply in writing to enter popular public relations courses. Instead of making admission on a first-come basis, select students who will provide balance to the classroom. This "quota" system--just like the admissions system used by many

universities--helps assure that there are plenty of males in each class.

(2) Recruit in the introductory classes. Most departments have a survey course that devotes one week to each of the sub-fields of mass communication. Often public relations is lumped in with advertising and treated as an afterthought. If the public relations teacher seizes the opportunity to come in as a guest speaker and deliver a presentation that captivates males, then the young man who is "shopping" may decide to buy public relations.

(3) Use only assertive, confident, "managerial type" teachers. The women who teach in the program at Rutgers University as professional adjuncts are not people who can be viewed as "technicians" or "creative types." One is the director of public relations for a large state agency, supervises a large staff of men and women, and is president-elect of the state chapter of the Public Relations Society of America. Another is Vice-President of Community Relations at the nearby medical center. Males have responded well to the style of teachers who show they can handle the managerial job.

(4) Use teaching assistants who are good role models for males. More care can be given to the

selection of graduate students who help administer courses, and undergraduates who act as peer counselors. They should be advocates for the profession who can influence men positively.

(5) Use internships and a "mentor" program to match males with role models in the field. Is a young man concerned that public relations doesn't have the clout he'd find in other areas of business? We'll pair him with somebody like Larry Foster, the Johnson & Johnson vice-president who oversaw the Tylenol comeback campaigns. We've also lined up the director of public relations at the Meadowlands sports complex and professionals at marketing firms specializing in sports promotions as mentors for males who worry about whether PR is "macho."

(6) Select "clients" for class projects that will interest males. The semester when enrollment in our campaigns course dipped below 25 percent males, we had a boutique flower shop as one of the clients for whom students were supposed to design a campaign. Now we know better. Recent clients have included a telecommunications company, a commercial real estate firm, and a Nautilus fitness center.

None of these concepts taken alone is particularly unusual or innovative. Taken as a whole, however, they represent a concerted effort to make the profession appeal to males. By treating them specially, we have turned things around. At Rutgers University, men are not fleeing public relations. In fact, we have brought the ratio between the sexes back to almost even numbers, relieving the field of public relations education from the burden of its own PR problem!

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